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**Understanding place value
in high street regeneration**

Creative methods in public engagement

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Understanding place value in high street regeneration: creative methods in public engagement

Key takeaways

1. 'Place value' refers to both the physical and socio-cultural attributes that make a place meaningful for people. It is crucial in understanding UK high street regeneration, particularly given the unprecedented challenges such efforts face.
2. Engaging communities in regeneration can help to capture place value. Community engagement should commence before consultations which focus on individual projects and should promote transparency and co-production.
3. Effective public engagement requires a mix of tools and formats to cater to the various preferences of participants. In our rapidly advancing digital age, planners should consider adopting creative methods such as interactive games, virtual reality, digital storytelling and real-time reporting apps to increase engagement, alongside traditional methods.
4. Policymakers could establish a digital twin or database where place value captured from public engagement can be embedded and accessed publicly. Digital twins can be a useful companion for high street regeneration as they can aid public understanding during engagement processes.
5. Collaborating with designers or design students to crowdsource ideas for regenerating the high street, when integrated into public engagement channels, can help participants in visioning the transformation and contributing to expectation management.

1. Introduction

The UK's high streets are facing significant challenges, particularly in small towns where town centres are rapidly declining with an increasing number of vacant units (Grimsey, 2013), shrinking public services ([Royal Society for Public Health, 2019](#)) and dilapidated infrastructure. A 2023 report showed that the highest persistent vacancy rates (8.3%) between 2015 and 2023 were in small towns (Craig et al., 2023). Overall footfall in high streets has decreased by 17% since 2019 for various reasons, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased retail share of online shopping (High Street Task Force, 2023).

In recent years, high street regeneration has been an important objective in the UK government's [Levelling Up](#) agenda. This briefing argues for building a better understanding of place value through effective public engagement. Place value

refers to both the physical and socio-cultural experiential attributes that make a place meaningful for people. It encompasses both tangible and intangible qualities that evoke people's sense of attachment and belonging to a specific place. This can be captured through public engagement in creative ways, using a range of methods that suit different people and social groups. Transparency is important to ensure concerns and claims are heard and debated which may assist decision-making about the future of high streets in often contested situations.

2. The challenges of participatory approaches to high street regeneration

Over recent years, traditional retail-focused monofunctional high streets have struggled to sustain themselves. Research has

identified a need to move away from the retail-dominated model to an 'experience' centred economy for the future of high streets (Grimsey, 2018; Whites et al., 2023). Such a transition may include arts and cultural offerings, public services, health hubs, leisure, entertainment, and educational spaces, as well as housing. The need for a diversification of high streets means community involvement is crucial, as regeneration will need to align with the demands of local businesses and residents.

Effective public engagement requires data resulting from consultations to be relevant, clear, actionable and location-specific (Frankova, 2013). Although public consultation has become standard practice within urban regeneration policy in the UK, effective participation presents challenges for developers, planners and urban designers. Appropriate tools and formats are needed to aid or enable participation from across different parts of the community. Digital technologies such as social media forums and online voting systems are increasingly being used to allow more people to participate directly and more frequently.

However, digital tools may not reach certain populations who have limited access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) or lack of relevant technical skills. As detailed in this briefing, our research suggests such tools do not necessarily increase people's desire to participate. The consequences may be that the results of public consultations are distorted with most participants from affluent social groups. More diverse forms of engagement that include disadvantaged groups are important to ensure fairness and long-term social sustainability.

It has long been a challenge to engage people in consultation on regeneration. People may be reluctant to invest time and effort in expressing their views, especially when they perceive they are not directly impacted by the outcome or anticipate delayed or inadequate responses. This

situation is exacerbated by austerity measures in local government in recent years, including cuts in public engagement budgets. Additionally, consultation is often regarded as not meaningful and outcomes are contested, when participants are asked to comment on a specific project or interventions in regeneration (Healey, 1997).

Current development policies in England as set out in the [Town and Country Planning Act 1990](#) and the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (most recently updated in 2023) mean consultation is often carried out late in the development process. Communities are usually consulted or notified only when a planning application is nearing submission, although some discussions may occur between the developer and local authorities beforehand. The tight timescales for a decision to be made on proposed developments further limit the opportunities for wide-ranging, in-depth participation, particularly in relation to important community projects. Consultation is therefore often a passive process that relies on the public to step forward to offer opinions. As a result, consultations rarely ensure that place value is embedded in the development process of high street regeneration, where changes are constant, rapid and responsive to public demands.

3. Our work in Huyton

Huyton is a small town at the outskirts of Liverpool under the administration of Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council (KMBC). The town centre and the high street Derby Road is surrounded by business parks and established residential neighbourhoods with distinctive heritage features. Retail in the town centre was declining even before the COVID-19 pandemic. KMBC's efforts to regenerate the high street were marked by the adoption of the [Huyton Village Masterplan SPD 2017-2028](#), which sets out a vision for future development.

Collaboration was established between KMBC, the Liverpool School of Architecture team led by Sandy Britton and Fei Chen, and local architecture practice Architectural Emporium, to work on a plan for the high street in 2021. The initial collaboration focused on crowdsourcing regeneration ideas from architecture students for temporary projects and permanent interventions (Britton et al., 2023) to test needs and feasibility. This added pedagogical benefits to students' education while also allowing them to offer fresh perspectives on the potential of the high street.

Over 30 proposals were generated ranging from urban farms, temporary markets, power-generating towers, cinemas and housing. In addition to gathering students' views, we tried to involve the community in envisioning changes to the high street and determining place value using social media platforms, websites and blogs, as well as an on-site design exhibition and seminars. Nevertheless, the public's involvement during this stage was limited for several reasons, such as design drawings not being easily understood by many members of the general public, the limited number of participants who use social media, and the timing and short duration of the engagement events.

[Huyton Valued](#) was the second stage of the collaboration and funded by Research England in the first half of 2023. Primarily targeting public engagement, the project aimed to gauge place value through digital technologies including game engines, virtual reality (VR) walk-throughs, spatial modelling, and animation. Based on KMBC's observation, there is a large young population in Huyton (36% of the population aged under 30), and their engagement in the regeneration proposals had previously been limited. Thus, digital tools were used to target this group. Nevertheless, we also combined traditional methods and delivered three one-day workshops with targeted social groups such as younger people and

older members of the community, and partners at three locations (Figure 1).

We asked participants to experience the spaces through digital tools, aided with large maps, post-it notes, and interviews. We captured how they value the high street in both text and audio forms which then were embedded into a digital twin of the town centre (Figure 2). Through mixed methods, we were able to engage with over 50 participants, a large proportion of whom were young people. Participants talked in length about their stories, memories, and expectations regarding the high street. Comments were publicly presented online in relation to their specific locations in the digital twin wherever possible. This allowed people to 'walk' through the digital twin, where they can read and listen to anonymised comments at specific locations - an experience similar to gaming. The digital twin or database was designed to be expandable as more public engagement events occur as part of the regeneration process.



Figure 1: A public engagement workshop with participants held in the Make on the Corner, May 2023 (credit: author)



Figure 2: A screen shot of the digital twin of Huyton's town centre where public engagement outcomes are embedded in textual (speech bubble icon) and audio

4. Making public engagement meaningful and effective

The Huyton projects offer some insightful lessons for policymakers and planners. First, data generated from face-to-face conversations with participants, assisted by digital technologies, proved more relevant and location-specific than the data from social media surveys, which relied entirely on individuals who happened to encounter them and were willing to participate. Websites and blogs were used mostly for the dissemination of information rather than engagement. This is consistent with literature which advocates for mixed consultation approaches to cater to various preferences (Levenda et al., 2020; McKinley et al., 2021).

Second, working with community partners was essential in recruiting participants through their social networks. Small towns often have established social networks and strong opinions on local spaces which can be the basis for collaborative planning. The locations and format of the workshops played a role in determining who and how many people we were able to engage. Direct invitations to local groups through partners were the most effective route to engagement and on-site workshops for targeted groups were preferred. Workshops were operated on a 'drop in' basis to enable participants to attend throughout the day. In each workshop conducted in Huyton, we were able to have in-depth conversations with 15-20 participants, each lasting between 20 and 60 minutes.

Third, previous research suggested that in-situ and immersive experiences would enhance the effectiveness of public engagement, and tools such as photographic walking, GIS mapping or interactive maps are useful (Cinderby 2010). In the *Huyton Valued* project, our utilisation of 3D models, animation of spaces, VR walking and gaming allowed participants to visualise the existing and proposed spaces more easily. This was evident from the substantial amount of

consultation data generated from the three workshops, as compared to the responses to architectural drawings showcased in the exhibition during the first stage of our Huyton project. A good understanding of space served as a prerequisite for meaningful discussions about value, which were place-based, highly individual and memory-related. However, not all participants enjoyed VR and games - some preferred maps and photos. Such preferences were not necessarily tied to age or gender, which suggests there is a need for a range of visual forms of engagement.

Fourth, using crowdsourcing design ideas as conversation starters was instrumental for public engagement. Ideas about what is possible on the high street provided inspiration for participants who were able to envision change, gauge feasibility, and assess the impact of proposals on themselves. For example, in our workshops in Huyton, we showed student proposals of a cinema and a cultural hub on the high street which made participants think beyond retail. On the one hand, such crowdsourcing ideas need to be broadly consistent with the local authority's masterplan, to avoid raising unrealistic public expectations. On the other, the hypothetical nature of the design ideas alleviated tension in the management of changes, making the conversations more relaxed. An adverse effect of this was that some participants believed their opinions were less likely to inform regeneration, as they might not be directly relevant.

Finally, the digital twin of the town centre, which hosts and presents place values, created a long-term and flexible public engagement mechanism. It can be enriched with more data on an ongoing basis. The place value digital twin is intended to be a companion of the regeneration process, which can be referred to by local authorities, planners, designers, design consultants, other stakeholders, and the public to assist in making decisions. It

enables place value to be embedded from an early stage of the regeneration process. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the digital twin needs regular input via both traditional and digital participatory methods, thus requiring a public engagement budget to keep it running. Future research may investigate to what extent the place value database is directly reflected in regeneration decisions, given the complex factors influencing development projects. Nonetheless, it did offer valuable information for subsequent interpretation and reflection in the regeneration process.

5. Conclusion: policy implications

High streets in UK towns need continuous attention to keep them liveable, sustainable and resilient to adverse effects of economic, social and environmental changes. Building a place value database or digital twin through effective public engagement can help with gathering support, validating concerns, prioritising investment, empowering communities, and managing changes, which ultimately contribute to an improved quality of life for residents. While we advocate for a mix of engagement methods, the digital twin was particularly useful because it offered participants in-situ and immersive experiences and was able to collect consultation data in a consistent manner.

This briefing argues for a consultation approach involving the entire community, extending beyond project-specific consultations. Community based consultation incorporating engagement on place value could make a powerful contribution to town centre regeneration without linking to specific development projects. National level policy could encourage digital twins to be established in communities where social networks are firmly established and large-scale public space or infrastructure regeneration is expected, such as in small towns. Local authorities may initiate this action by

establishing collaborations with design consultants, local universities, and community organisations. This is because crowdsourcing design ideas from architectural students or designers can prove to be highly valuable for envisioning change, managing expectations, and testing feasibility. As such, public engagement should commence before specific development needs arise and be decoupled from individual project timelines. Such a strategy ensures inclusiveness in consultation to facilitate reach to underrepresented groups.

Digital creative technologies provide opportunities for public engagement by providing immersive and interactive experiences to participants, but are more effective when combined with face-to-face communication and other traditional participatory methods. The place value digital twin is both a tool for public engagement during the process, and a legacy of the engagement that can benefit regeneration in the long term. It captures and showcases the values of everyday spaces that go beyond the official recognition of heritage value, which typically involves listing buildings and assigning conservation areas. The engagement process could also enhance social learning, building trust and capacity within communities. By giving validity and allowing for debates, it informs various stages of regeneration, including visioning, proposal designing, implementation, construction, and post-occupancy management through collaborative planning.

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